

EDITORIAL

Responsible Transformation Infrastructures: Reframing Sustainability, Digital Transformation, and Capability Development Under Institutional Constraints

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Abstract

Contemporary management research faces the paradox of simultaneous demands for sustainability, digital integration, transparency, adaptability, and social accountability amid complex institutional constraints. This editorial introduces *responsible transformation infrastructures* as integrated systems of governance, routines, digital architectures, legitimacy mechanisms, learning processes, and capabilities that operationalize sustainability and digital transformation. We discuss emerging evidence challenging linear assumptions about CSR, digital adoption, and capability development, emphasizing configurational and practice-based perspectives. Implications for research in emerging and institutionally complex markets are outlined, and future directions for integrated, operationalized responsible management are proposed.

KEYWORDS

Responsible transformation, Sustainability, Digital transformation, Capability development, Governance, Institutional constraints, Legitimacy, Adaptive infrastructure.

1 | FRAMING THE TRANSFORMATION CHALLENGE

Contemporary management research is increasingly shaped by a central paradox. Organizations are expected to become simultaneously more sustainable, more digitally integrated, more transparent, more adaptive, and more socially accountable, while operating amid intensifying institutional complexity, resource constraints, technological uncertainty, geopolitical volatility, and stakeholder scrutiny. The central challenge is therefore no longer whether organizations should transform, but how to operationalize responsible transformation within institutional constraints. Across industries and institutional environments, sustainability and digital transformation are increasingly becoming foundational infrastructures through which firms organize legitimacy, governance, learning, stakeholder relationships, and long-term adaptation.

Despite the growing prominence of sustainability and digital transformation in management scholarship, research remains fragmented. Corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability governance, environmental transformation, digitalization, and organizational capability development are often treated as separate domains, despite important conceptual overlaps between responsibility and sustainability logics (Bansal and Song 2017). Existing research frequently explains why organizations adopt sustainability practices or digital technologies, but far less attention has been devoted to how organizations operationalize responsibility through governance systems, organizational routines, digital architectures, legitimacy mechanisms, and adaptive capabilities. Responsibility without operational infrastructure often remains symbolic, while digitalization without governance may increase complexity rather than adaptability.

This editorial seeks to advance that discussion by proposing a more integrated perspective on responsible transformation amid institutional and capability constraints. Rather than being driven by isolated technologies, symbolic sustainability commitments, or linear investments in organizational capabilities, responsible transformation increasingly

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depends on developing what we term responsible transformation infrastructures: interconnected systems of governance, routines, digital architectures, legitimacy mechanisms, learning processes, and capability configurations that translate sustainability and digital ambitions into measurable, operational outcomes.

Earlier work often treated sustainability and digitalization as additive variables, expecting that more CSR, greater technological adoption, more data, or more innovation would yield superior organizational outcomes. However, emerging evidence increasingly challenges these linear assumptions. Research on digital transformation emphasizes that technological adoption alone rarely produces competitive advantage unless it is embedded in processes of strategic renewal, organizational learning, and dynamic capability development (Vial 2019, Warner and Wäger 2019). Similarly, sustainability research increasingly shows that CSR outcomes are contingent, context-dependent, and shaped by institutional legitimacy, stakeholder alignment, and capability orchestration rather than by the mere volume of sustainability investments (Aguinis and Glavas 2012, George et al. 2016). Recent CSR and sustainability research further challenges universalistic assumptions about sustainability-performance relationships by demonstrating nonlinear threshold effects, complementarities, and synergistic ESG configurations across organizational contexts (Appiah and Boateng 2026).

Recent research increasingly supports a shift from linear to configurational thinking. Contemporary studies suggest that sustainability, digital transformation, governance systems, legitimacy structures, and capability development operate through complex complementarities, sequencing mechanisms, and adaptive organizational routines rather than through isolated managerial interventions (Appiah and Boateng 2026, Boateng and Etroo 2026, Lv et al. 2026). This perspective aligns with the resource-based and market-capability traditions, which emphasize that competitive advantage depends not merely on resource possession but on the organizational capacity to configure, integrate, and deploy capabilities under changing environmental conditions (Barney 1991). Collectively, these developments suggest that responsible transformation emerges not from isolated managerial variables but from systems of interaction among technologies, institutions, governance arrangements, capabilities, stakeholder expectations, and organizational routines. The future of responsible management may therefore depend less on adoption and more on orchestration.

2 | RESPONSIBLE TRANSFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURES

Importantly, emerging and policy-shaped markets should be viewed not merely as peripheral empirical settings but as theoretically generative environments for the development of management theory. Emerging and institutionally complex environments make visible infrastructural fragilities, governance gaps, legitimacy asymmetries, capability constraints, and financial tensions that often remain less observable in

mature-market settings. Recent sustainability-oriented marketing research suggests that capability development in policy-shaped environmental markets is strongly conditioned by legitimacy barriers, procurement structures, and cash-cycle conflicts, highlighting the importance of constraint-sensitive capability orchestration under institutional pressure (Lv et al. 2026). Recent research on sustainability-oriented capabilities further suggests that adaptive B2B and interorganizational capabilities are increasingly central to sustainability-oriented transformation amid institutional complexity (Correggi et al. 2024). In such contexts, sustainability transformation depends not only on strategic intent but also on whether organizations possess the financial, institutional, and governance capacity to credibly operationalize environmental value.

As Suchman (1995) argued, legitimacy is not merely symbolic; it is essential to organizational survival and access. In sustainability-critical markets, legitimacy is closely tied to procurement access, technological credibility, stakeholder trust, and capability development. This perspective aligns with growing calls for management scholarship to engage more directly with grand challenges, societal transitions, and institutional complexity (George et al. 2016, Ferraro et al. 2015). Grand challenges associated with climate change, ecological fragility, resource scarcity, and planetary boundaries increasingly require multi-level governance and adaptive organizational infrastructures (Whiteman et al. 2013). These challenges cannot be adequately understood through isolated firm-level performance models alone; instead, explanations must link organizational capabilities, technological infrastructures, institutional arrangements, stakeholder systems, and governance mechanisms.

Within this emerging perspective, sustainability and digitalization can no longer be treated as separate strategic domains. Contemporary research on capability development and sustainability governance increasingly shows that organizations experience digital transformation, legitimacy pressures, stakeholder expectations, and adaptive learning processes simultaneously rather than sequentially (Boateng and Etroo 2026, Lv et al. 2026). Digital infrastructures increasingly mediate sustainability measurement, governance, stakeholder engagement, operational coordination, organizational learning, and adaptive decision-making, while sustainability pressures are reshaping the legitimacy requirements, governance expectations, and ethical boundaries associated with digital transformation.

Emerging research on digitally enabled sustainability systems suggests that operational responsibility increasingly depends on integrated sensing infrastructures, adaptive coordination architectures, real-time monitoring systems, and decision-support capabilities rather than on symbolic post hoc reporting practices alone (Juma et al. 2026). Many organizations, however, continue to struggle to operationalize responsibility. Recent sustainability and CSR research increasingly suggests that organizational outcomes depend not merely on the presence of sustainability initiatives but on how these initiatives are calibrated, combined, governed, and embedded within broader organizational systems (Appiah and Boateng 2026, Aguinis and Glavas 2012). Corporate

responsibility, ESG commitments, sustainability reporting, digital transformation initiatives, and stakeholder-oriented governance are often presented at a symbolic or declarative level, while the organizational routines needed to translate these ambitions into measurable outcomes remain underdeveloped.

Recent cross-cultural sustainability research further suggests that environmental responsibility increasingly mediates the relationships among sustainability awareness, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive behavioral change across institutional and generational contexts (Cui et al. 2022, Chebeñ et al. 2026). The critical issue is therefore no longer whether organizations claim responsibility, but whether they possess the infrastructures to enact it. Responsible transformation infrastructures may therefore become increasingly central to understanding how organizations operationalize sustainability and digital transformation amid institutional and resource constraints.

3 | FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Future research should move beyond linear and universalistic assumptions about sustainability and digital transformation outcomes. The critical issue is increasingly not whether sustainability investments, technological adoption, or organizational capabilities improve performance, but which combinations, governance arrangements, temporal sequences, and institutional conditions generate long-term value creation and organizational resilience. Greater attention should also be devoted to operationalization processes. Sustainability and digital transformation become meaningful only when embedded in organizational routines that include measurement, coordination, accountability, learning, adaptation, and governance integration. This shift reflects the growing importance of practice-based and microfoundational perspectives in management and sustainability research (Teece 2007), including recent calls for a stronger practice turn in supply chain sustainability studies (Lissillour and Silva 2024).

At the same time, scholars should further examine the tensions inherent in digitally mediated sustainability systems. While smart infrastructures, AI-enabled governance systems, predictive analytics, Digital Twins, and real-time monitoring architectures may improve efficiency and responsiveness, they also heighten concerns about legitimacy, surveillance, transparency, accountability, privacy, algorithmic bias, stakeholder trust, and the automation-augmentation paradox in algorithmic governance systems (Kellogg et al. 2020, Raisch and Krakowski 2021). These tensions suggest that the future of sustainability governance will depend not only on technological sophistication but also on institutional legitimacy and governance design.

Management scholarship should continue to treat emerging and institutionally complex environments as theory-building contexts rather than merely empirical settings for testing theories developed elsewhere.

Recent cross-cultural sustainability studies increasingly show that institutional environments, cultural dimensions, and generational differences significantly shape the emergence of environmental responsibility and sustainable behavioral adaptation amid uncertainty and societal transformation (Chebeñ et al. 2026, Lissillour et al. 2022). These environments make visible the infrastructural fragilities, legitimacy asymmetries, governance gaps, financial constraints, and capability limitations that often remain less visible in mature-market settings.

Future research should increasingly integrate the literature on sustainability, digitalization, governance, and capability development into more unified explanatory frameworks. Existing research often examines these domains separately, even though organizations experience them simultaneously and interdependently. Scholars should also pay greater attention to temporal dynamics and the sequencing of transformations. Sustainability and digital transformation rarely unfold as stable, linear processes. Organizations must continuously balance short-term operational pressures with long-term capability development, adaptive learning, stakeholder legitimacy, and institutional resilience.

More broadly, management research is entering a phase in which sustainability, digital transformation, governance, legitimacy, and organizational capability development can no longer be treated as analytically independent. Instead, organizations increasingly operate through interconnected transformation infrastructures that integrate technological systems, stakeholder expectations, organizational routines, governance arrangements, and adaptive capabilities. This emerging perspective aims to foster a more grounded understanding of responsible management, in which sustainability and digital transformation are not treated as automatic routes to superior organizational performance but as institutionally embedded and governance-dependent processes that require orchestration, legitimacy, adaptation, and operational viability.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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